

SOME DENDROGLYPH STYLES IN THE CHATHAM ISLANDS

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Abstract. Three groups of dendroglyphs in the Chatham Islands are characterised by their main patterns and the stylistic variations between them.

The Chatham Islands are situated some 970 km to the east of New Zealand. They consist of two main islands, Rekohu or Chatham Island and Rangiauria or Pitt Island. Chatham Island (Fig. 1) is *ca.* 60 x 50 km with a large lagoon opening to the east taking up most of the centre of the island. The land area consists of two main blocks north and south of the lagoon, with narrow fingers projecting from each on the eastern side to form the entrance of the lagoon. On the western side a more substantial limestone strip borders the lagoon. Much of the centre of the larger land blocks is peat country. Pitt Island which lies to the south-east has sloping high ground with cliffs up to 300 m high in some places but sloping to the sea in others.

The dominant vegetation cover of the peat lands is either dracophyllum forest or bracken fern. These areas are known as "clears". Along the coasts and the strip of limestone to the west, the dominant forest cover is karaka or kopi bush (*Corynocarpus laevigata*). There are other trees but it is particularly the karaka or kopi which is concerned here. The kopi bush is found where it is protected by the seaward sand dunes or topography. The bush normally has a canopy at 10 m with the projecting dune overtopping this by 4 m in most places. The kopi bush grows in a strip of 50-400 m between the dunes and the peat or in the middle limestone area or sheltered valleys in the tableland (Hamel 1977).

The first human inhabitants of the Chatham Islands could have landed there directly from island Polynesia or by way of New Zealand sometime before A.D. 1200. These people were later called the Moriori from a reduplicated form of the word Maori (ordinary), the word that many of the East Polynesian groups use to refer to themselves. Their origins were in the culture of East Polynesia which is based on a variable economy with agriculture, hunting, fishing and shellfish collecting as components. In a given situation any one of these components may be emphasised almost to the exclusion of the others or they may all be used in a seasonal cycle of activities. In the Chathams, part of the agricultural components, that based on imported cultigens of tropical origin, taro, yam, kumara, arrowroot and plantain was not possible in that the plants if introduced did not survive. However, part of the technology associated with this activity did survive as did the activity itself in a changed form. The rhizome of the bracken fern (*Pteris esculenta*) is edible and was used as a carbohydrate source (Skinner & Baucke 1928: 359). When Broughton in the *Chatham* made the first recorded European visit in 1791 he remarked, (Broughton 1798: 85) "The woods in some spots had the appearance of being cleared, and

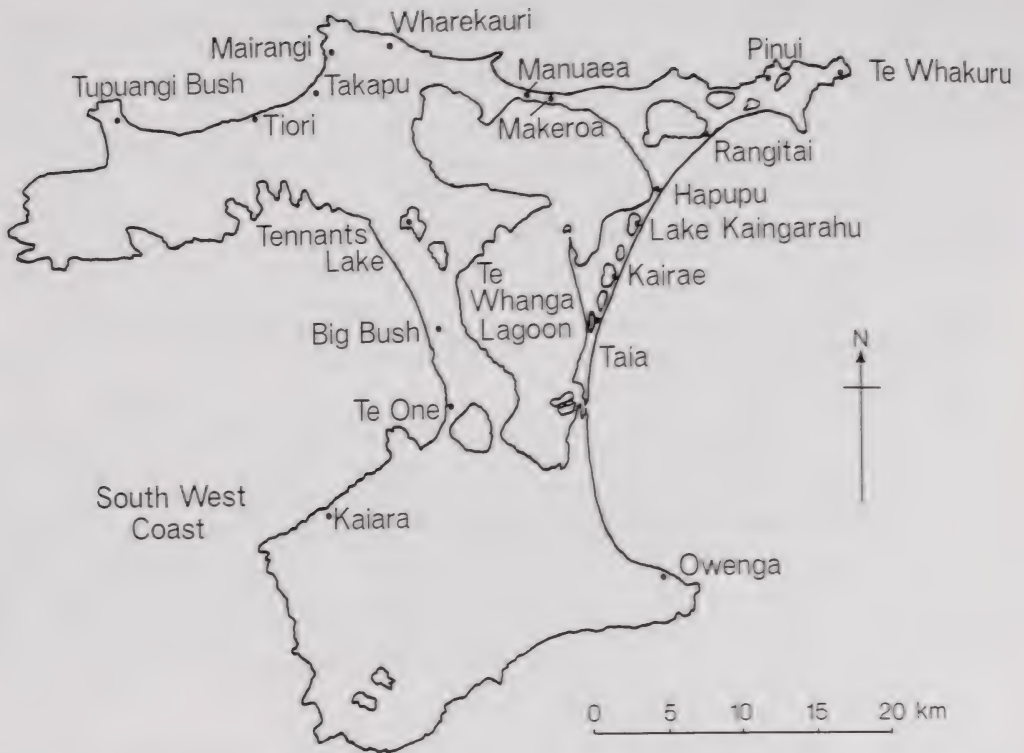


Fig. 1. Map of Chatham I showing localities mentioned.

in several places between the hills smoke was observed". It is likely that some of the kopi bush was cleared by the Moriori seeking to increase their food options by adding a carbohydrate source. However such destruction was not extensive as Broughton in 1791 (*ibid*) mentioned the area east of Cape Young as "some high land rising gradually from the beach and covered with wood extends 4 miles [6.4 km] to the eastward of the Cape. After passing this land, we opened the several hills over the low land we had seen in the morning and could discern many of them were covered like our heaths in England, but destitute of trees". This refers to the Mairangi and Wharekauri areas of coast and clears. Before European settlement, Dieffenbach (1841: 158, 159, 160) was able to describe non-peat areas of the island as being "covered with an open forest of trees of moderate dimensions" or "the low hills that border the sea shore, which are wooded and surround the island with a girdle of green verdure. Amongst the trees, the Karakka tree (*sic*), generally about forty to fifty feet [12-15 m] high, and one to three feet [0.3-0.9 m] in diameter . . . forms the substance of the forest".

The dendroglyph styles

In the kopi bush carvings are present on many trees. There is some evidence from earlier reports (such as Travers 1876, Dendy 1901, Skinner 1923, Jefferson 1956) and from elderly residents that carved kopi were relatively common in areas now entirely devoid of trees. This also applies to some areas where carvings were recorded in 1963-64

(Simmons 1964). The main causes of destruction are clearing, followed by animals. Animals reduce the fringe bush, allowing the karaka roots to dry out, and stifle any regeneration by eating the seedlings.

In the summer of 1963-64 I, and a small team of two or three helpers, worked with a grant from the N.Z. Historic Places Trust to map and record the dendroglyphs and sites of the Chathams. The archaeological side of this work has since been carried on by the University of Otago. Stuart Park, then of Otago Museum, reinvestigated the dendroglyphs in 1975 (Park 1976). During the 1963-64 expedition some six hundred dendroglyphs were mapped and recorded. Finding the carvings was not easy as they were usually covered with lichen. Hundred metre grids were laid out in the bush and every tree inside the grid squares cleaned down with a wire brush. The carvings found were then mapped, drawn, photographed and numbered.

There are many areas now devoid of trees where dendroglyphs have been reported but not well recorded in the past. One such area is that known as Tupuangi Bush on the north-west coast. An excavation at Tupuangi, of a single layer occupation site with a bush soil profile, gave a radiocarbon date of A.D. 1700 (NZ R1379/1 258 \pm 55 B.P.). Takapu, along the same coast, still had dead trees and three carved trees with stick-like figures in 1963. A search of the former Maori village area at Mairangi did not reveal any dendroglyphs though they were present if early reports are correct (Jefferson 1956). Similarly at Wharekauri, at the mid-point of the north coast, the trees have now gone but a few fragmentary carvings remained in 1963. A melanised soil horizon in the area suggests that at some stage the 'bush' was an area growing fern (Wright 1959). Jefferson recorded carvings on the north and north-east coasts at Pinui, Okawa and Te Whakaru (Jefferson 1956). Similarly the central limestone country had many carved trees, some of which were sold for garden ornaments in Christchurch when European farms were being cleared. There are still a few carved trees at Tennents Lake on the north of the limestone strip in a sheltered valley, and these are very different in style to any others. Carvings were reported for the south-west coast in the area between sea and uplands around Kaiara which is now grassland. It is possible the dendroglyphs in Canterbury Museum include examples from this area. Auckland Museum equally has examples from the limestone area, as has the National Museum. The dendroglyphs in the British Museum, London, would also seem to be from the limestone strip.

Any study of dendroglyphs is restricted to the few in museums, those recorded and those still remaining on the Chathams, thus any attempt to delineate regional or area styles is necessarily open-ended.

The main areas of recorded carvings are Makeroa, Manauea, Hapupu, Pinui, Okawa, Te Oriori, Taia, Kairae, Kaingarahu, Rangitai, Mairangi and Pitt Island. In 1963-64 some twenty-six groves and remnants of groves were recorded, sixteen have now gone. Some simple carvings have also been reported from South East Island. In this study I have taken only three main and fairly complete groups — Makeroa, Hapupu and Taia — to suggest the stylistic variability between them. These groups include seven distinct groves. The dendroglyphs of the other areas, e.g. Te Oriori, are quite recognizably different but there are too few carvings recorded on which to base a style determination.

The Makeroa style

Makeroa was a small strip of bush which was formerly in the area of the north coast between the lagoon and sea with high dunes protecting it on the sea side. It has now gone. When it was recorded, it was 100 m long and contained one hundred and twenty carved trees which could be separated into one main group and the remains of at least three others (Fig. 2).

The carvings can be divided into:-

- (A) Human figures with heart-shaped faces, stick bodies with opposed ribs or bodies framed by the arms and legs of a figure in a crouching position. Some figures are multiple (Figs. 3-6).
- (B) A feature of the main group was the number of abstract carvings of figures (Figs. 7, 8).
- (C) Vertical lines or geometric patterns (Fig. 9).

Hapupu style

Hapupu is in a similar position to Taia but on the northern head of the lagoon. Again the bush is protected by high dunes. Three hundred carvings were recorded at Hapupu in three main groves and up to eighteen smaller ones. The Hapupu style is altogether bolder than that of Makeroa, though there are some resemblances. A broader tool would seem to have been used.

- (A) Human figures show a considerable range of variation in the treatment of the body. The heads are generally broader and rounder than Makeroa and include some semi-cutout or cameo figures. Abstract carvings are rare but not unknown. The only double tier carving, i.e. two areas of carving at different heights on a tree (1-2 m and 3-4 m high) is also in this group (Figs. 10-15).
- (B) This is a more complicated design with dumb-bell shaped heads and filled-in bodies. The arms and legs are often unimportant (Figs. 16-18).
- (C) This is an abstract form found in one small separate group of six carvings in a two metre ring. One of these is human derived (Figs. 19, 20).

Taia style

Taia is a wedge of bush up to 300 m wide at one end decreasing to a point about a kilometre further south. Within this area are many large shell heaps, three intact groves and the remains of others. One hundred and forty carvings were recorded at Taia. The main group at Taia exemplifies the main style of the area. (Simmons 1965).

- (A) Human figures have very simple, sometimes uneven faces, bodies are mostly lines and arms and legs, while in the crouch position, are usually of little importance. Body features of importance, perhaps to a story, are emphasised (Figs. 21-23).
- (B) (i) Human figures cut out in cameo form. Many of these have fallen out (Figs. 24, 25).
- (ii) Animal forms in cameo or etched onto bark. (Fig. 26).
- (C) Figures stippled onto the bark (Figs. 27, 28).

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Figs. 2-4. 2. Makeroa bush in 1963 looking east. 3. Makeroa dendroglyph No. 580 (darkened with kerosene for photography). 4. Makeroa dendroglyph No. 578.

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Figs. 5-8. 5. Makeroa dendroglyph No. 599. 6. Makeroa dendroglyph No. 566.
7. Makeroa dendroglyph No. 626. 8. Makeroa dendroglyph No. 622.

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Figs. 9-12. 9. Makeroa dendroglyph No. 685. 10. Hapupu A dendroglyph No. 417 (in natural state after removal of lichen). 11. Hapupu A dendroglyph No. 107. Combination of surface carving and cameo. 12. Hapupu A dendroglyph No. 115 (outlined with white talcum powder).

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Figs. 13-16. 13. Hapupu A dendroglyph No. 106 (outlined with white talcum powder).
14. Hapupu A dendroglyph No. 104 (outlined with white talcum powder). 15. Hapupu A
dendroglyph No. 114 (outlined with white talcum powder). 16. Hapupu B dendroglyph No.
153.

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Figs. 17-19. 17. Hapupu B dendroglyph No. 157. 18. Hapupu B dendroglyph No. 58
(Multiple figures). 19. Hapupu C dendroglyph No. 48.

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Figs. 20-22. 20. Hapupu C dendroglyph No. 47. 21. Taia A dendroglyph No. 329. 22 Taia A dendroglyph No. 366 (outlined with white talcum powder).

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Figs. 23-26. 23. Taia A dendroglyph No. 324. 24. Taia B dendroglyph No. 300. A human figure cameo. 25. Taia B dendroglyph No. 348. Remains of cameo. 26. Taia B dendroglyph No. 377. "Shag" cameo.

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Figs. 27-29. 27. Taia C dendroglyph No. 506. Stippled design. 28. Taia C dendroglyph No. 392. Stippled design. 29. Hapupu dendroglyph No. 138. Grown out dendroglyph.

An excavation in an area between two groves which had only small regrown trees, revealed a series of ovens dated to less than 200 years ago (NZR 1379/3 149 \pm 54 B.P., NZR 1739/3 88 \pm 54 B.P.). A section of a shell heap composed of local shells had paua from the north coast at the base.

Discussion

Makeroa on the centre of the north coast, Hapupu on the north-east of the lagoon and Taia at the entrance of the lagoon are well separated. The three major styles delineated here with their variations would appear to be clearly enough distinguished to be characterized as regional styles. Within each area though, forms and shapes are depicted in a particular way in each grove, even though they are somewhat similar in all the areas studied. Within a grove there is a strong feeling of artistic identity and unity which could suggest that most of the carvings within a grove are the work of an individual artist who was relatively free to utilise varying approaches to similar subjects. This feeling of identity is strongly conveyed within the main grove at Hapupu and becomes clearer when sketching each carving in turn.

There is little to suggest that the variations in area style or between groves are time differences. The surviving dendroglyphs would appear to be late in prehistory or within the post-contact period. Dendroglyphs were seen that may be earlier or contemporary but were now almost unrecognisable due to tree growth (Fig. 29).

The significance of dendroglyphs in Moriori culture

The Morioris positive adaptation of a subantarctic hunting strategy (Sutton & Marshall 1980: 41) did not involve a completely nomadic settlement pattern but a more carefully organised pattern of base village areas occupied for most of the year with a series of out-stations for seasonal exploitation of resources. Such base village areas could have been associated with dendroglyph groves.

Traditionally in the late period the population was divided into tribes exploiting discrete areas with similar resources. Fighting over resources was known until the traditional hero Nunuku is said to have proclaimed the laws of peace, laws which were maintained even in 1835 when they were faced with invading musket armed Maori from New Zealand. The eventual disappearance of the Moriori people stems from this invasion either directly from death during the invasion or later as a result of the despair of an enslaved people forbidden to marry by their conquerors. Most of the available records of the Moriori, either made by outside observers or written by themselves, date from this period (Simmons 1962: 238). The dendroglyphs are not directly mentioned in any of the accounts and seem to belong to an earlier period, even though as Skinner remarked (Skinner 1923: 69) 'No feature of Moriori culture has aroused more interest than the tree carvings, and no feature has been more fruitful in theories that attempt to explain their meaning'. Jefferson found the carvings were in "groves" (Jefferson 1956: 54). Mapping of the surviving dendroglyph concentrations indicated clearly that where the group was intact they generally tended to face into a common centre and that in an area like Taia, where more than one "grove" survived, these could be separated on this criterion into groves which were confirmed by the presence of shell outside the grove. Food remains are generally absent from the groves though they may be plentiful outside them (Simmons

1964). This would suggest that the groves had a tapu or sacred function associated with the ancestors and mythology. The human figure dendroglyphs recorded would seem to fall into groups.

- A Particular human figure forms with marked attributes which occur in more than one area despite any artistic or regional variation. These are about twelve in number.
- B Human figures with recognisable attributes which occur only in one area and are not repeated outside of it.

It is suggested that the first group represents ancestors or mythical figures common to the traditions of all areas while the second group represents local beings or ancestors. Traditional records include a vast number of incantations associated with food procurement. This is to be expected in a culture dependent on the natural resources which only the gods and ancestors could control. One cause for despair after 1835 was that, as slaves, the Moriori were moved to new areas and did not know the appropriate prayers to protect themselves. It is perhaps in the context of relationship between men and the natural world that the dendroglyphs were carved, not to take possession of certain trees but to emphasise the interdependence of men, ancestors, gods and the natural world and to symbolize this relationship by either naturalistic or abstract designs on kopi trees. They were probably placed in groves to serve as ceremonial centres.

Conclusion

The dendroglyphs in different places can be established as belonging to different style areas and within these the work of individual artists can be recognised.

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